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WASHINGTON TIMES
22 April 1987

Senate probers vote immunity, will force Poindexter to testify

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Senate panel investigating the Iran-Contra scandal voted yesterday to force the testimony of former National Security Adviser John Poindexter, who is in a position to reveal what, if anything, President Reagan knew of the affair that hasn't already been made public.

The House select committee probing the matter is set to vote limited immunity for Adm. Poindexter today.

Adm. Poindexter, 50, had frequent briefings with President Reagan between Dec. 5, 1985, when he took over the adviser's job from Robert McFarlane, until November 1986, when he resigned after the scandal was publicly disclosed.

Sources on the committees said Adm. Poindexter is believed to have kept meticulous notes of important National Security Council meetings on Iran arms sales, during which fund diversions to Contra groups may have been discussed.

The Tower commission report on the scandal, released in February, said Adm. Poindexter was the designated note-keeper in key meetings at the NSC.

But the commission said "no notes for the meetings can be found. We have no way of knowing if they exist."

Under terms of the immunity, witnesses can be forced to testify under oath, but what they say cannot be used as a basis for prosecution.

The questioning of Adm. Poindexter is expected to revolve around how much he knew about diverting funds from arms sales to Contra groups, and how much he did or did not tell the president.

Mr. Reagan has denied knowledge of any diversion of arms money to the Contras.

Indirect testimony given to the Tower commission by Attorney General Edwin Meese III and former White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan was not conclusive.

Mr. Meese said Adm. Poindexter told him he "did know about it. [Lt. Col. Oliver] 'Ollie' North [of the NSC staff] had given him enough hints that he knew what was going on, but he didn't want to look further into it. But, in fact [he] did generally know that the money had gone to the Contras as a result of the Iran shipment," according to the Tower report.

Mr. Regan told the commission Adm. Poindexter said to him, "I had a feeling that something bad was going on, but I didn't investigate it and I didn't do a thing about it. . . . I didn't want to know what, if anything, was going on. I should have, but I didn't."

But one member of the Senate select committee said yesterday he expected Adm. Poindexter and others might tell "startling" stories under oath.

"I think the hearings will produce some startling revelations," said Orrin Hatch, Utah Republican. "I think one of the revelations that everyone is looking for is . . . everybody knows that Poindexter and North are just the chain of command and they are going to have to say where they got the authorization to do whatever was done."

Mr. Hatch said the American public would be "surprised about the money trail — where it came from and where it went." He said the amount of money actually diverted from arms sales to Contra groups would also be a surprise, but he declined to say whether the amount was more or less than the \$10 million to \$30 million Mr. Meese estimated in November.

Sen. Warren Rudman, New Hampshire Republican, ranking minority member of the select committee, said the panel had nearly completed the process of uncovering the money trail from Iran to Central America.

"The committees . . . have an excellent idea of where the majority of the money went — how it was handled — and we'll have it certainly as complete as you can ever get anything like that by the time the hearings start" on May 5, Mr. Rudman said.

He also said the committees would have a doctor examine former CIA Director William Casey to ascertain his precise medical condition before the hearings start. Mr. Casey underwent surgery in December to remove a malignant brain tumor.

"The record should be historically correct," Mr. Rudman said. "The committee's taken no official action, but I expect at some point a discreet inquiry made in some way."

"I don't think anybody has any doubt [that Mr. Casey is seriously ill], but I think . . . since Casey potentially is such an important witness . . . there ought to be some corroboration," he said.

Under an agreement reached last month with independent counsel Lawrence Walsh, the House and Senate committees investigating the affair waited until yesterday before voting on a grant of immunity for Adm. Poindexter.

Staff attorneys are scheduled to meet privately with him on May 2, under terms of the deal with Mr. Walsh. He would be publicly questioned at a hearing set for June 15.

The agreement with Mr. Walsh allows the committees to interview Col. North privately in early June, and publicly a few weeks after that.

That timetable was arranged to give Mr. Walsh time to pull together his own case for possible prosecutions. Any testimony by witnesses given immunity could not be used in a criminal case against them.